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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000220

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SUBJECT: MALAWI ELECTIONS UPDATE - RUSHING TO ADDRESS
REGISTRATION AND BUDGET PROBLEMS

REF: A. LILONGWE 183 AND PREVIOUS
1B. LILONGWE 198

LILONGWE 00000220 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The inspection of Malawi's new voter roll revealed numerous problems, including 50,000 missing registrants and over 300,000 people with data errors. To quell political party complaints and add the missing voters, the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) has hired 550 temporary staff to reconcile paper registration forms with the voters roll. Budget shortfalls have prevented the MEC from paying the deposit for printing ballots and other polling materials.

The UNDP-managed election trust fund will help the MEC meet these immediate needs, while deferring others. Former president Muluzi continues to challenge the MEC's ruling that he is ineligible to run for president, but it is unlikely the court will rule on the matter before the scheduled ballot printing on April 28. Muluzi has in any case publicly thrown his full support to Malawi Congress Party (MCP) candidate John Tembo (septel). According to the MEC's media monitoring unit, both major daily newspapers and the largest independent radio stations are providing fair and balanced coverage of political parties and election events. State radio broadcaster Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) and Television Malawi, however, have devoted over 95% of their coverage to the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).
End Summary.

Registration Problems Surprise MEC

¶2. (SBU) Public inspection of Malawi's new electronic voters' roll ended on April 10. The inspection uncovered numerous problems, including large numbers of missing voters at many polling stations. While a few stations were missing over 25% of the expected registrants from the roll, the MEC said they believe approximately 50,000 voters (less than 1% of the total registered) were actually affected. The MEC indicated the problems were not clustered in key districts, as some political parties had feared, but rather appeared to be widely dispersed throughout the country. The MEC said the missing voters were in the registration system, but lacked a polling station number on their forms so the system left them off the roll. To correct the problem, the MEC has hired 550 temporary workers to review paper registration forms and make the additions.

¶3. (SBU) In addition to missing voters, over 300,000 voters names (5% of the total registered) had data errors such as misspelled names. Due to the high error rate, the MEC announced it will change the final voters roll format so that it is printed in voter identification number order instead of alphabetical order. To help facilitate voting by people who

have lost their voter identification cards, the MEC will also print a cross-reference report of voter ID numbers in alphabetical order for each station. However, the MEC will still not allow those who do not appear on the final roll to vote, even if they have valid MEC ID cards.

MEC Money Problems Persist

¶4. (SBU) The MEC presented a supplementary budget request of \$10.5 million USD on April 9. The MEC asked for the additional funds due to the extended voter registration exercise and cost overruns in many departments. The government of Malawi initially said it could pay for 56% of the new request, but has not released any additional funds yet. Election trust fund contributors, who are still trying to address \$3.2 million USD in exchange rate losses on their original pledges, have indicated they will not be able to contribute any new money to meet the shortfall. UNDP and the European Union said they would be willing to reallocate money from other projects, but the GOM must tell them from which projects to take the money. Japan, who had previously not contributed to the election, will direct \$1.4 million towards generators, vehicles, and computers for polling day.

¶5. (SBU) Without additional government or donor funding, the MEC is experiencing serious liquidity problems. Despite signing contracts for ballot papers, indelible ink, and other polling materials, the MEC has been unable to pay deposits. To help, the UNDP-managed election trust fund has agreed to defer final payments on voter registration equipment to free up \$1.97 million USD for the new contracts. Of this funding, \$1.4 million USD will go to a 50% deposit for the ballot printer who should complete ballot printing on April 28. The MEC said they plan to have all ballots and other election

LILONGWE 00000220 002.2 OF 002

materials in Malawi by May 8.

Muluzi Quits Race, But Not Courts

¶6. (U) After the Constitutional Court dismissed his initial challenge of the MEC's decision to declare him ineligible to run for president on legal technicalities (ref b), former president Bakili Muluzi redrafted and refiled his challenge. The Court has now accepted the case and Muluzi is awaiting a hearing date. While he has vowed to continue his court battle, Muluzi told supporters he was bowing out of the race in 2009 and held his first joint rally with new alliance partner, the MCP's John Tembo, on April 18 (septel).

MEC Scraps High Tech

¶7. (SBU) After being shocked by the large number of errors in the computerized voters roll, the MEC has reconsidered using a computer-based results transmission system. The MEC said it will now send results sheets via fax from 29 district offices to the MEC headquarters. The MEC is also considering tallying the votes at the constituency level and sending only one results sheet per constituency via fax. However, the MEC noted that while this option would simplify the reporting process, it would not allow the MEC to provide progressive results from individual polling stations as previously planned. The MEC will have generators at all 29 district locations to ensure fax capabilities work on polling day.

State Media - All DPP

¶8. (U) According to both the MEC's media monitoring unit and the Malawi Communications Regulatory Agency (MACRA), both major daily newspapers and the largest independent radio stations are providing fair and balanced coverage of political parties and election events. However state radio

broadcaster Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) and Television Malawi have devoted over 95% of their coverage to the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Joy Radio, owned in part by former president Muluzi, has countered by devoting over 90% of its coverage to Muluzi's United Democratic Front. Despite MBC's national reach, the MEC said they will also use independent radio station Zodiac Broadcasting Service to announce results to ensure broad and fair coverage.

Bingu Gets Top Billing on Ballot

¶ 9. (U) Taking advantage of Malawi electoral law which allows for each candidate to specify how they want their name to appear on the ballot, President Bingu wa Mutharika asked to be listed only as Bingu. The six other candidates all submitted their full names. The MEC said the ballot will list candidates in alphabetical order by surname. With Mutharika dropping his surname, he has effectively moved his name from the middle to the top of the presidential ballot.

Finances and Legal Challenges Still Threaten Polling Date

¶ 10. (SBU) Comment: Logistically and operationally, the MEC remains on track to hold elections on May 19. Inadequate finances remain a problem, but trust fund donors have been clear about their limitations regarding additional funding. It will now be up to the GOM to decide what level of funding is essential to holding the elections and to provide it to the MEC in time. The Muluzi challenge remains another potential threat to the election schedule. The former president's case is not likely to be finished before ballots are printed and, if reversed, could leave the MEC with 6.5 million ballots that have to be modified before elections can take place. End Comment.

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